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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 BUENOS AIRES 001462

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SUBJECT: ARGENTINA: THE K-STYLE OF POLITICS

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[1](#)B. BUENOS AIRES 01403  
[1](#)C. BUENOS AIRES 02974  
[1](#)D. 05 BUENOS AIRES 00141  
[1](#)E. 05 BUENOS AIRES 02835  
[1](#)F. 05 BUENOS AIRES 00115

Classified By: Ambassador Lino Gutierrez for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

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SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION  
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[1](#)1. (C) This cable is designed to examine President Nestor Kirchner's unique operating and decision-making style that has become known as the "K-Style." Given Kirchner's control over all aspects of GOA policymaking, knowledge of Kirchner's motivations and methods in arriving at decisions is essential to understanding GOA actions.

[1](#)2. (C) President Nestor Kirchner's personalistic, often erratic operating and decision-making style defines current Argentine policymaking and is characterized by an overarching focus on the short-term and politically expedient accumulation and maintenance of domestic political power. Kirchner's domestic political style leaves no room for dissent and utilizes divide-and-conquer tactics to weaken the political opposition. While utilizing leftist, populist rhetoric at times, in practice Kirchner has demonstrated that his ideological leanings are always less important than the practicalities of domestic politics. Studies show that Kirchner's psychological profile includes a need to always be in control, quick and decisive decision making, a constant struggle against perceived enemies, and a tendency to respond to challenges by lashing out, rather than negotiation. Foreign policy in the Kirchner government is always subservient to domestic political considerations. President Kirchner is not skilled at international diplomacy and often ignores basic protocol. Kirchner relies on an ever-shrinking group of long-time advisors to make key decisions, many of whom lack international, business and economic expertise.  
END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

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THE K-STYLE IN DOMESTIC POLITICS  
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13. (C) President Nestor Kirchner's personalistic, often erratic operating and decision-making style defines current Argentine policymaking and is characterized by an overarching focus on the short-term and politically expedient accumulation and maintenance of domestic political power. Close Kirchner insiders have described Kirchner's decision-making process to Emboffs as one in which Kirchner consults with a small number of trusted advisors, generally one-on-one, and then makes all of the final decisions himself. The Argentine political system places a great deal of authority into the hands of the President, and President Kirchner is a strong president even in the Argentine historical context. As a result, the "K-Style" defines the GOA policymaking process and gives the policy process a short-term focus. As Legal and Technical Secretary Carlos Zannini, a close Kirchner advisor, told the DCM, "The President and I get up every morning, look at the morning papers, and try to figure out how to survive the day." Another long-time Kirchner associate, former Santa Cruz Governor Sergio Acevedo told us that Kirchner focuses very much on day-to-day issues, but always with the long-term strategic goal of retaining political power. (COMMENT: Kirchner's focus on retaining political power leads us to discount speculation that Kirchner will step aside in 2007 and make his wife Cristina the presidential candidate. For 2011, assuming Kirchner's health holds, we would expect him to either modify the Constitution to allow him to run for a third term, or to pass the mantel on to his wife. END COMMENT.)

14. (C) Kirchner's domestic political style leaves no room for dissent and utilizes divide-and-conquer tactics to weaken

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the political opposition. Kirchner is quick to silence any opposition to his policies from within his movement, as when he recently expelled congresswoman Maria del Carmen Alarcon from the presidency of the Lower House Agricultural Committee and from Kirchner's Victory Front (FPV) after Alarcon criticized the GOA beef policy (See Reftel A). Kirchner has also proven adept at co-opting members of the opposition and exploiting divisions within opposition parties. Through the skillful use of his fiscal powers, Kirchner has been able to draw in the majority of the Radical Civic Union (UCR) governors, and many UCR mayors (See Septel on deteriorating provincial finances and Kirchner's use of fiscal power for political aims). He has also been able to co-opt the political leadership from the now defunct center-left Frepaso and most of the Peronists formerly aligned in opposition to Kirchner with former President Eduardo Duhalde. Kirchner has exploited divisions within the UCR by heavily courting Mendoza Governor Julio Cobos, long-time rival of UCR President Roberto Iglesias, even encouraging rumors that Cobos may be Kirchner's running mate in 2007. Kirchner also does not accept criticism from those outside of the political arena, attacking the press, the Catholic Church and business leaders that have been publicly critical of the GOA.

15. (C) While utilizing leftist, populist rhetoric at times, in practice Kirchner has demonstrated that his ideological leanings are always less important than the practicalities of domestic politics. As Acevedo recently told us, President Kirchner has no true ideology. For example, the issue of human rights and his political affiliations in the 1970s were non-issues in the 20 years of Kirchner's political life as Mayor of Rio Gallegos and Governor of Santa Cruz province. Acevedo said Kirchner's recent support for the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and a renewed focus on human rights crimes committed under the last dictatorship was driven by his need to develop a core base of support within the left wing of the Peronist movement. Kirchner was also a big proponent of the 1990s privatizations at the time they occurred, but has since vehemently attacked them. This does not mean that Kirchner does not have left-wing sympathies, but rather that these are completely subordinate to his personal political interests

and ambition (See Reftel B). Kirchner's left-wing sympathies have not stopped him from forming alliances of convenience with center-right Peronist leaders, such as Luis Barrionuevo of Catamarca, Cordoba Governor Jose Manuel de la Sota, or the largely conservative Peronist political machine in Buenos Aires province.

¶6. (C) Kirchner's style of policymaking has become more pronounced after the October 2005 elections and November 2005 cabinet changes left Kirchner firmly in charge of all aspects of GOA decision making (See Reftel C). Prior to the October elections, Kirchner had to consider former President Duhalde's opinion in making major decisions. Kirchner's resounding victory in Buenos Aires province in the elections left him in control of the Peronist Party (PJ) and banished Duhalde from the center stage of the political scene. Before Kirchner's November cabinet changes, Kirchner also had to contend with his independent-minded Minister of the Economy, Roberto Lavagna, in making economic policy decisions, and with then-Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa, who occasionally exhibited an independent streak. Their replacements, Felisa Miceli and Jorge Taiana are loyal soldiers who follow presidential orders. For example, recently Miceli was give a copy of a communique that had been issued to a news agency by the Casa Rosada with Miceli's comments criticizing a recent speech by Lavagna before Miceli had actually spoken. As leading pollster Roberto Bacman told Poloff, "Never since the return to democracy (1983) has Argentina had a President that was also the Minister of the Economy."

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KIRCHNER'S PSYCHOLOGICAL PROFILE SETS K-STYLE  
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¶7. (C) According to recent studies, Kirchner's psychological profile includes a need to always be in control, quick and decisive decision making, and a constant struggle against perceived enemies. Kirchner does not delegate policymaking,

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making all of the important decisions himself. Kirchner only consults with a narrow group of long-time advisors, who are part of Kirchner's inner circle primarily because of their loyalty, not their technical abilities (See Reftel D). He often does not even consult or give warning to top GOA officials before making major policy statements in their respective areas of responsibility. According to Central Bank officials, for example, Central Bank President Martin Redrado found out that the GOA was going to use nearly 10 USD billion in Central Bank reserves to pay off the IMF when Kirchner publicly announced it. Casa Rosada insiders have described Kirchner as prone to making quick, sometimes even rash decisions. For example, Kirchner reportedly made a snap decision to institute a six-month ban on beef exports after learning that the price of beef had risen a significant amount the previous day in the country's most important beef market. Kirchner has lashed out at has perceived enemies, both domestic and foreign, throughout his presidency. Kirchner's targets have included the IMF, the U.S., the media, the Catholic Church, the Argentine military, the foreign and domestic business community, supermarkets, foreign gas stations, anything that happened in the 1990s, former Presidents Carlos Menem, Fernando de la Rua and Eduardo Duhalde. Kirchner often targets unpopular groups or individuals as a means to increase his own public approval ratings.

¶8. (C) When confronted with a problem, Kirchner's first instinct is to go on the offensive, rather than negotiate, upping the ante if his initial efforts fail to win the desired result. When Kirchner faced resistance from the business and agricultural sector on his efforts to control inflation earlier in the year, Kirchner instituted a ban on the export of beef and appointed the unorthodox Peronist economist Guillermo Moreno to run the GOA's anti-inflation efforts through bullying and threatening individual producers

to lower their prices. When Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez did not respond well to Kirchner's insistence that Uruguay halt the construction of two paper plants on the Argentine border to conduct additional environmental studies, Kirchner's rhetoric encouraged the residents of the affected province to step up their blockade of the bridges connecting the two countries, resulting in millions of dollars of lost trade and tourism income for Uruguay. Faced with rising gas prices in early 2005, Kirchner called for a national boycott of Shell Oil and sent thousands of piqueteros to blockade Shell Oil gas stations until they agreed to lower their prices.

¶9. (C) Kirchner has a reputation for taking slights or any perceived lack of respect from others personally, but is also known for quick changes in temperament. Acevedo told the DCM that once then-Governor Kirchner became enraged with his Deputy Energy Minister for making a statement regarding Santa Cruz energy policy he did not personally approve. Kirchner called the Deputy Minister into his office and proceeded to scream at him at the top of his lungs, ultimately effectively throwing him out of his office physically. Everyone in the provincial government leadership expected the Deputy Minister to be fired. Kirchner did not speak to him for two weeks, until he unexpectedly called him asking for some trout for a dinner that Kirchner was hosting. Acevedo said this individual had a reputation for knowing where to get the best trout in Rio Gallegos. The Deputy Minister complied with the request, and two days later Kirchner invited him for coffee. Kirchner greeted him warmly, thanked him for the trout, and proceeded to chat with him for a long period, as if the previous incident had never happened, to the shock of everyone else present, including the Deputy Minister. In the end, the Deputy Minister was not fired, and Kirchner did not raise the issue again.

¶10. (C) Kirchner's health condition exacerbates, and perhaps helps define, Kirchner's emotions and psychology. President Kirchner has reportedly suffered from irritable bowel syndrome for many years. According to the American Medical Association, the psychological effects of this condition leads those who suffer from it to be "often rigid, methodical persons who are conscientious, with obsessive-compulsive

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tendencies." Kirchner also reportedly works himself to exhaustion and needs to take frequent vacations to recover. The AMA further states "Psychologic and social stresses are often present in patients with irritable bowel syndrome, and may be related in a temporal sense to the exacerbation of symptoms." This may account for Kirchner's lack of attention to protocol that involves long ceremonies or tight schedules, where Kirchner would not have quick access to a bathroom.

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FOREIGN POLICY NOT KIRCHNER'S FOCUS  
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¶11. (C) Foreign policy in the Kirchner government is always subservient to domestic political considerations. Kirchner, at least initially, took a hard line on the paper mills dispute with Uruguay -- despite the damage to Mercosur and regional relations -- because of the strong Argentine public concern about the paper mills, particularly in ruling-party-run Entre Rios province that is on the opposite side of the river from the plants. Kirchner's explicit and harsh criticism of the U.S. during his speech during the Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata can only be understood in the context of dismal public perceptions of the U.S. and Kirchner's desire to appeal to his leftist political base (See Reftel E). Kirchner's hardball tactics during negotiations over Argentina's private sector debt and his criticism of foreign companies that run major enterprises that were privatized in the 1990s do not earn him any support from foreign investors, but are popular with the Argentine public. Likewise, Kirchner cut Argentine gas exports to

Chile in 2005 to cover shortages in the internal market despite the existence of valid contracts between Chile and local gas suppliers.

¶12. (C) President Kirchner is not skilled at international diplomacy and often ignores basic protocol. Kirchner's gaffes with foreign dignitaries are legendary. In June 2004, Kirchner left Russian leader Vladimir Putin waiting at the Moscow airport for a meeting that never happened, reportedly because Cristina Kirchner wanted to spend more time shopping at their previous stop in Prague. The GOA claimed that "bad weather" had delayed their takeoff when weather reports showed sunny conditions in Prague. Later that year, President Kirchner failed to attend a state dinner he was supposed to host for visiting Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong. In like fashion, Kirchner failed to attend a reception in honor of the State visit of Queen Beatrix of Holland in March of 2006. Kirchner also never receives new Ambassadors, as state protocol would dictate, relegating this responsibility to Vice President Daniel Scioli.

¶13. (C) Kirchner relies on an ever-shrinking group of long-time advisors to make key decisions, many of whom lack international, business and economic expertise (See Reftel D). No one from the Foreign Ministry is part of Kirchner's inner circle of advisors, and very few of Kirchner's close associates had overseas experience before Kirchner became President (See Reftel F). As a result, Kirchner often receives poor advice on international issues, such as when Legal and Technical Secretary Carlos Zannini reportedly convinced Kirchner that taking a tough line publicly on counter terrorism would, in the eyes of the USG, compensate for being critical of the U.S. in other areas and opposing the FTAA at the Summit of the Americas (See Reftel E).

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COMMENT -- IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S.  
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¶14. (C) Kirchner's peculiar operating and decision-making style defines Argentine policymaking, and in the coming year, may lead to more challenges in the U.S.-Argentine relationship, as Kirchner focuses on shoring up his center-left political base for the 2007 elections. Given poll numbers that show Argentines have the least positive view of the U.S. out of all nations in the region, the U.S. will be a convenient target for Kirchner. As during the 2003 presidential campaign, Kirchner will likely portray himself

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as the lone true defender of Argentina in the world community. The Casa Rosada has reportedly already begun an effort to link Roberto Lavagna to the U.S., for example by encouraging press articles that the U.S. approved and is sponsoring a potential Lavagna campaign for President.

¶15. (C) Kirchner has a history of using international disputes, like the paper mill conflict with Uruguay, to gain domestic popular support. We have been told by our British colleagues that relations between the U.K. and Argentina are at their lowest point in 15 years because Kirchner has chosen a confrontational attitude with the U.K. on the Falkland Islands dispute, thereby making political use of an issue that is at the core of Argentine national identity. As leading political analyst Rosendo Fraga told Poloff, "This year, Kirchner will use the U.K. and Uruguay as targets, and next year, it will be the U.S." Kirchner has been described to us by his close associates as someone who constantly focuses on the costs and benefits of his political decisions. During a recent trip to Spain, Kirchner criticized the U.S.'s "absence" and lack of significant assistance to the region. Former Minister Lavagna told the Ambassador that Kirchner did this in order to counter the image that he had been too forthcoming with Spanish multinationals during the trip. As the 2007 presidential campaign approaches, we cannot rule out occasional anti-U.S. diatribes by Kirchner in

order to placate his leftist supporters.

GUTIERREZ